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ABSTRACT

The Palo Alto Peer Counseling program, now finishing its third year of operation, is described. The first year was a pilot year in which the idea was tested and the beginning draft of a curriculum developed. The second year was a developmental year, in which the practicum groups were started as students who had taken the 12-week training the previous spring started their assignments. In this year the first course was offered for adults wishing to become supervisor-trainers. The third year, now ending, was the experimental year when the program is being systematically evaluated. The overall program is discussed with the philosophical foundation included and the future goals for development outlined. (Author)

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"PEER COUNSELING: TRAINED TEENAGERS REACHING PEERS IN HUMAN RELATIONS"

APGA, San Diego, California
February 11, 1973
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Critical characteristics of a helping person include a healthy self-esteem which allows an individual to feel he has something to give or contribute to another; an ability to establish a relationship with another person, particularly one who is not a close friend; an awareness of problems people can experience, with some emotional understanding of what happens when one has a problem; and finally some ability to deal with problems as they arise. It would seem that if all people had these characteristics our human community would function much differently and there would be little need for counselors and psychologists in our society. However, individual child-rearing practices do not provide a systematic human growth curriculum. Everywhere we see people with low self-esteem, some unable to relate to another, perhaps because of fear, or lack of behaviors to do so, and others so involved with themselves and their concerns that they do not notice the problems of others. Many of us find at times we cannot deal with problems.

The Palo Alto California Peer Counseling program attempts through its training to teach these skills and to build these characteristics in those who participate. It was started with the aim of using student resources to reach out and help those peers who could more effectively be helped by a fellow student, to reach students who seldom receive the help and attention of adult counselors because their problems are less than severe. . . the middle group with normal developmental problems. As the program matures and develops a shift of purpose is occurring, leading to the aim of touching the lives of those who go through training, knowing that they will live their lives differently as a result; be more sensitive to others around them; reach out to help in a natural way and lead those about whom they are concerned to more effectively deal with their problems. Our evaluation shows we are reaching more students through training than we are directly helping through prescribed assignments. This one factor may have long range effects on the direction our program will take.

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I would like to describe our program by outlining the sequential history of it, noting the developments, underlining important aspects to be considered by anyone who wishes to start such a program. At the same time I will point out areas where our program may be unique from the other two programs being presented. The program itself is training, taking assignments and continued learning throuhg practicum supervision.

PHILOT PHASE - The First Year.

The concept of utilizing students, those who are minors legally, to work in mental health helping roles can be questioned. Are students capable of dealing with problems of another when perhaps they have numerous problems of their own? These and other questions were raised when the idea for a program emerged. Would students care enough to be trained and interested

enough to give of their time and energy? The pilot year was spent investigating answers to these questions. Care was exercised every step of the way to control for mistakes that would eliminate the program before it had been tried. Public relations work, communication, development of curriculum and critical selection of trainers were the elements of concern the first year.

Long before students heard about the program, ground work was laid by a systematic consultation with critical individuals and groups. Starting with the Superintendent, meetings were held with the District's psychological staff, counselors in each building and PTA Councils of all six secondary schools. Carefully worded announcements were put in PTA newsletters and school bulletins.

The philosophy and guiding principles of the program were then developed along with the rough draft of the first curriculum. The basic principles of our program are these:

1. It is open to all students in grades 7-12. No screening would be done by anyone to eliminate a student before he took the training.

2. The commitment to the program would be tested by established hurdles, such as requirement of attending all 12 sessions, making up any session that was missed; going to a central location for training, without help in transportation; and attending training sessions on student's own time. No school time was missed for training.

3. The training would be done in small groups composed of a mixture of all six schools and all age groups. Midpoint in the training the groups would be reassigned to provide for meeting new students and to allow for practice in using the skills covered in the first six sessions.

4. The curriculum would revolve around three areas: 1) communication skills; 2) ways of dealing with problems in areas of family, school, health and peer relationships; and 3) strategies and ethics of counseling dealing with referrals, getting started, confidentiality and limits of peer counseling role. The techniques and activities for teaching these areas were developed out of experimentation on the part of each of the original trainers. These were evaluated and eventually a uniform curriculum was developed based on such experience and evaluation.

The original trainers were hand picked from both the Stanford Medical School Faculty and the Palo Alto School District. Dr. Beatrix Hamburg, Child Psychiatrist on the Stanford Medical School Faculty was co-developer with me on this program and eventually the Director of the NIMH project which was funded the second year of operation. Those chosen met our requirements which were: 1) they had an earned reputation of being successful in working with adolescents; 2) they were skilled in small group techniques; 3) they prepared curriculum and 4) their willingness to volunteer their time without any financial compensation. Twelve such

people were found, many of whom have continued with the program.

Informing students of the program, recruiting them for training was the final step in preparation. This was done differently in all six schools. Some individual classes were attended where 15-20 minutes was spent in explaining the program. Recommendations from teachers were used in another, a bulletin in another, student team visiting classes in another and teacher announcement in another. The students were told two things: Anyone was welcome, but particularly those who knew what problems were and that the program would take a commitment of time. Students were urged to think carefully before enrolling. The overwhelming turnout at the first Orientation meeting was the first concrete sign of success. From this group 152 students completed the first student training course in peer counseling.

SECOND YEAR - DEVELOPMENTAL YEAR

Several major components were added to the program in the second year:

1. The initiation of Practicum groups for practicing peer counselors.
2. The initiation of the first assignments.
3. The securing of liaison personnel in each school buildin
4. The teaching of the first training course for adults to become supervisor-trainers.

1. Practicum Groups

As the school year started, fearing the loss of enthusiasm from the trained peer counselors, the practicum groups were immediately begun. The purpose of these weekly meeting groups is primarily to provide on-going support for students taking assignments. The groups are led by those who did the training and are devoted to peer counselors discussing their assignments, asking for help from every member of the group as to what should be done with some particular problems. It has a double purpose in that the practicum serves as a specific training, based on the practical rather than the theoretical. These groups also serve legitimate evidence that we provide on-going supervision for working peer counselors.

The effectiveness of the practicums is affected by the leader's ability to establish group cohesiveness and to what extent specific help is given to students. There is no prescribed curriculum to follow and a general need arose among the peer counselors for more structu in these groups. This has consequently been built into the program. My group covered such topics as what do I do when an elementary student loses his temper and is out of control, to when it is really time to stop spending time with a student, to how it feels when the "counselee" doesn't need you any more, to at times frequent sessions spent on discouragement. A junior high practicum spent a lot of time role playing calling a new student on the telephone, and discussions about the differences between being friendly and being a friend. Once students experience group cohesiveness or that they are getting help from it, members attend regularly.

2. Assignments

All peer counselors are given a choice as to the age level they prefer

for an assignment and what kind of assignment they would like. We found ourselves with a large group of trained peer counselors and no assignments. As a result a request form for peer counseling service was developed and visits to individual schools to inform them of the program began. Every faculty group of each elementary school was visited, and the counselors were contacted at the secondary level. The elementary responded in quantity which was very fortunate because most peer counselors wanted to start with this age level. The problem of locating assignments at the secondary level continues to be a problem. The Junior highs have consistently used peer counselors for orientation purposes and welcoming new students, but seldom have a specific referral. The peer counselors at one high school this year organized a breakfast for new students to Palo Alto which was followed by a bag lunch meeting to introduce one another and finally a party (pot luck) at the home of one peer counselor. As the year progressed we noticed more and more students utilizing peer counselors on an informal basis - approaching them in the hall or on the campus.

3. Liaison Personnel

To keep counselors informed and more indirectly the school, a liaison person was needed at each school. It was hoped that some counselor would be designated from each school and in most cases this happened. When one did not feel they had the time, then a teacher or some other person was found. This person not only was kept informed as to who the peer counselors were in that school, but events taking place and the type of assignments that each peer counselor in his school had. When messages needed to be given to peer counselors of one school this person was contacted. Many took this job very seriously and became heavily involved in the program.

4. Adult Training Course

If the program was to eventually be absorbed into the on-going functions of the school, then school personnel needed to be both informed and educated about the program. Also as we began facing the prospect of another training group, we knew we needed more supervisors. Consequently in January of the second year a course was offered to those who would like to become Trainers. It was opened to all school personnel including classified personnel and to parents. Twenty-five adults completed this course which was centered on teaching the curriculum that would be used in the student training program. Of those 25, approximately 10 were parents. When they had completed the 8 week training they were assigned, if they chose to be a co-leader with one of the "veteran" leaders from the first year. This way they did not have to immediately be on their own in training groups.

As part of the program, all trainers met once a week to discuss what had happened in their groups and to talk over problems which may have arisen. In every step of the program the adult group parallels the student work.

It was hoped that all counselors in the district would take this course. The ability to attend as well as the interest varied. In two schools all of the counselors have taken the course. In one school none have taken it. Those taking it are not expected if they do not desire, to go on and take a training group. But being informed about the program helps the overall foundation of the program in the district. Over the time of training five of the school's psychologists have taken it.

THIRD YEAR - EXPERIMENTAL YEAR

In July of 1972 the program was funded for a three year period by NIMH. With the submitting of the proposal, agreement was made to do careful evaluation of the program as well as to build a model that could be diseminated to other schools, particularly to minority group schools. The funding provided for a research staff and additional staff members. At this time one and a half staff members were added and two research assistants. The summer was spent in interviewing both students and parents particularly related to a drug research grant. From these interviews, valuable information was collected about the effectiveness of the training for peer counselors which Mrs. Boyers will report.

Starting with this year, evaluations are being made regarding the skills of trained peer counselors before starting an assignment and following the practicum work; evaluations of changes of behavior on the part of students counseled and a pre-training evaluation of students beginning their training this month. At the same time records are being kept on the kind of assignments students are taking.

As we tabulated the assignments from the previous year we found that:

23 peer counselors had worked on assignments dealing with social problems
4 peer counselors had had assignments dealing with physically handicapped
19 on basically tutoring assignments
4 on working with new students; 4 with foreign students
4 had assignments dealing with groups
3 had been trained and conducted structured interviews
4 assisted with the training of the second group of peer counselors
4 had worked with educationally and mentally retarded
2 on physical skill problems

At the start of the year most of the students wanted elementary, but as the year progressed, many of them wanted assignments at their own schools. Several students who could have graduated in January chose to stay on to continue in the program and gradually we are collecting evidence of what effect this had on the peer counselor's own life, ranging from vastly improved family relations, to dropping out of the drug scene, to increased self-awareness and greater social poise and concern for others. One aspect we intend to pursue is the program's effect on the vocational lives of students.

Major work of the program to date has been the preparation of a training package to distribute to other districts. This material has been prepared and will accompany a video-tape that has been made of an adult training course together with the video-tape of student training program beginning next week.

When the second adult training course was begun in November, 1972, 50 adults turned out for the training. This time, no parents were invited, so this group mainly represents teachers with some counselors and psychologists and nurses. Of this group 10 represented minority groups, 7 of whom were Chicanos. One particular school outside the district sent 13 of their faculty to take the course, among whom was a nurse and secretary. This was the first time an administrator took the training. Every session of this course was video-taped for inclusion in the packet.

As these training groups are held the foundational base of the program is being strengthened and the school personnel are becoming committed to its continuance. The program could now continue without any one individual in the District being necessary.

It was during this year that the Peer Counseling brochure was published for distribution to those who are interested. This has also been the year when experimental programs are being conducted in Monterey, Santa Rosa and West Community Mental Health Center in San Francisco.

FUTURE

Certain developmental challenges loom on the horizon:

1. Requests have come to offer such a training to 5th and 6th graders so they might work with students in their own school.

2. Several people have seen the potential of this training for in-service training for teachers, counselors and psychologists. A course could be modified to serve this need.

3. Frequent requests have come from parents for such a course specifically for them. This is planned for the future.

4. As growing evidence is produced, it seems apparent that the student course has sufficient merit for the development growth of students. Ideas have been suggested for providing it as a regular elective within our schools.

There seems no end of possibilities this type of a program presents. As more and more needs for individual attention rise to the surface; as more and more cut-backs are being made in guidance personnel, more and more need for utilizing such human resources seems apparent.